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ABSTRACT

Mainstreaming students means moving them out of segregated learning environments in special education classes and integrating them into regular classes with "normal" children. Mainstreaming also has relevance to gifted children. Both gifted and handicapped students are searching for meaning, for which the primary source is language. The main medium for transmitting meaning from one generation or culture to another is language through literature. Mainstreaming has many implications for the learning of language, literature, and composition. For example, every child enters a classroom with his or her own lexicon of the English language. Mainstreaming both handicapped and gifted children increases the diversity of the classroom--teachers should capitalize on the wealth of students' language. Such diversity also allows for the use of peer tutors and in mainstreamed classes, low, average, and high achievers can be praised for positive contributions to the class. In light of such diversity, random grouping is recommended to explore themes in literature. Instead of teaching language, literature, and composition as separate subjects, efforts should be made to teach for transfer from one area to another. For example, the nature of mainstreamed classrooms necessitates the structuring of composition instruction in a developmental sequence of language skills. (HTH)

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MAINSTREAMING: IMPLICATIONS FOR THE LEARNING OF LANGUAGE, LITERATURE, AND COMPOSITION

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MAINSTREAMING: IMPLICATIONS FOR THE LEARNING OF LANGUAGE, LITERATURE, AND COMPOSITION.

Public Law 94-142 (Education for All Handicapped Children Act), in theory, guarantees every handicapped child a free and appropriate education. Since its passage millions of dollars have been channelled to various educational agencies and countless educational systems to ensure its implementation. High level educational positions have been created, and textbook companies have developed "magic" formulas to guarantee the recipients that their free and appropriate education will lead them to a pot of gold somewhere at the end of a rainbow. These efforts are all very worthwhile, indeed extremely necessary, but PL 94-142 is only as effective as the seemingly insignificant schoolteacher who, usually taken for granted and often ignored by lawmakers and administrators alike, has to ultimately make the education appropriate, if not free. Regardless of how good a special education program looks on paper, it is what happens to Mary and David in the classroom that will determine the ultimate success, or failure, of this law. As one insightful educator puts it, if we assume that PL 94-142 can have a significant impact on the lives of children without the support of the classroom teachers, then we surely are not students of recent educational history (Roubinek, 1978).

Mainstreaming a student means a move out of segregated learning environments in various special education classes, and integration into regular classes with "normal" children. Whether or not the teacher is prepared to deal with the child is irrelevant. In the meantime, the child is searching for something - identity - acceptance, perhaps, even - self.

It can be appropriately stated that the child is searching for meaning. Meaning is purpose. It is also that which is intended to be expressed or understood by language (Macmillan, 1977).

When one refers to the term "handicapped child," a multiplicity of images are immediately conjured up in the mind. There are handicaps that are readily visible, and those that are not readily visible. Children who are physically handicapped (i.e. dismembered, defective at birth, or have various muscular or degenerative diseases, e.g.), are readily visible and therefore may have a more difficult time in the mainstreamed classes. This is so even though these children may be intellectually parallel to the average or so called "normal" child in the regular classroom. There are also those who are mentally and socially handicapped. Their handicaps are not readily visible. Included in this latter group are the educable mentally retarded, the learning disabled, and the behaviorally disordered children.

Regardless of the nature of the handicap, the main criteria for removing a child from a special education class for placement in the mainstream is that the child be able to perform academically on a level within the range of the normal classroom spread. This range is arbitrary and is usually determined by each school system, and often by each individual school.

The subject of mainstreaming is not only applicable to special education children at the one end of the continuum, it also has relevance to the children at the other end, gifted children. Usually described as those children who possess qualities or innate abilities recognized by formal and informal testing and observation devices as being academically talented, these children often manifest interest and success in several physical,

intellectual, and artistic pursuits. They are often isolated in "gifted" classes, and need to be mainstreamed. Since a child may be gifted in one subject area, and not in another, he should be mainstreamed for those subjects in which he displays average aptitude, ability, and achievement.

Every child is in search of meaning. The search begins at birth. The main source of meaning is language. The main medium of transmitting meaning from one generation to another, and from one culture to another, is language through literature. Therefore, in order for a child to fully discover the self (who he is, from whence he came, perhaps even where he is going), he must explore the literature.

Exploring literature necessitates a basic understanding of the mechanics of language, its atomistic conceptions, its deep structure, its various structural components, the variations of its surface forms, its clarity and its ambiguities, its uniqueness; the child must explore its composition.

There are a number of implications of mainstreaming for the learning of language, literature, and composition. Some of the more generic ones follow.

LANGUAGE BEGINS AT BIRTH. When a newborn baby hears the words "It's a boy, or girl" that baby has had the first input toward language acquisition (i.e., language learning). By the time a child enters kindergarten, that child has already developed, internalized, and has the capacity to use a system of rules that determine how sentences are formed, used, and understood. In essence, the child has acquired a lexicon of the language. This lexicon consists of an active vocabulary of several hundred words, which are used effortlessly to create numerous sentences. The child also has a passive, listening vocabulary of many hundred of additional words.

The lexicon of the English language is finite. Based on this finite lexicon, a child can generate an infinite number of sentences by simply rearranging words using set patterns based on about five structural kernels. The child has, in effect, internalized a linguistic theory, or grammar, that is descriptively adequate in terms of the structure of the language to the extent that it correctly describes the intrinsic competence of the idealized native speaker, i.e., the child (Chomsky, 1956). A child does all of this without definitions or conscious effort. This linguistic theory will allow the child to identify nonsentences, or sentences whose structural patterns do not conform to the grammar that has been developed.

INTEGRATING SPECIAL EDUCATION CHILDREN FROM BOTH ENDS OF THE CONTINUUM INTO THE MAINSTREAM INCREASES THE DIVERSITY OF THE CLASSROOM: THE ELEMENTARY SCHOOL TEACHER SHOULD CAPITALIZE ON THE WEALTH OF STUDENT LANGUAGE. Learning is a continuous process. The linguistic theory, or grammar, that each child internalized and developed, is firstly unique to a particular child, and secondly to a child's geographical location. It is based on the input that each child received from the home and environment prior to reaching school. In our complex modern societies, where prople are very transient, it is important that there be a degree of uniformity to language in order to allow for a free and unencumbered exchange of verbal and written communication, unhindered by the uniqueness of geographical accents and subcultural derivations. The classroom teacher is assigned the task of introducing the child to "correct" usages of the grammar which has been learned. It is therefore the task of the teacher not to eradicate the language of the home environment, but rater to introduce the child to a different mode of expression so that the child can become more flexible in the use of language. The mainstream is a means to this end.

INSTEAD OF TEACHING LANGUAGE, LITERATURE, AND COMPOSITION AS THREE SEPARATE SUBJECTS WITHIN THE MAINSTREAM, EFFORT SHOULD BE MADE TO TEACH FOR TRANSFER FROM ONE AREA TO THE OTHER. For example, instead of teaching the structure of language (parts of speech, clause and phrase analysis, etc.) from isolated sentences or drill sheets, a selection of literature may be used. The selection may be read, or studied, as a group activity; then selected sentences may be used to study the structure of language. This will force students to recognize that the components of sentences which they study are really integral parts of the language which can be encountered in any reading situation. It will then be easier for children to see the relevance and necessity of understanding the relationships between the various constituents in a sentence and between sentences in a paragraph. This procedure can also be further used to teach basic reading skills. Using the same strategy study a reading selection with the target groups, then choose a sentence (from the selection) from which words may be chosen for structural analysis study (i.e. syllabication, c/v patterns, derived and inflectional endings, etc.). This will help to alleviate the problem so often encountered when students ask why they have to study "this baby stuff" (usually encountered from fifth-grade up). They will be aware that each phonetic element, or word, is important to the learning and use of the language, and is necessary for the reading, understanding, and interpretation and appreciation of literature.

THE DIVERSITY OF STUDENTS ALLOWS FOR THE UTILIZATION OF PEER TUTORS. Occasionally, when a teacher has almost exhausted teaching strategies to teach a concept to a particular child, a student who has grasped the concept may be asked to explain it to his classmate(s). This student-student relationship not only helps one student academically, it also increases the self-concept of the helping student, as well as self-confidence in a particular area.

THE MAINSTREAMED CLASS IS A PLACE WHERE LOW, AVERAGE, AND HIGH ACHIEVERS CAN BE PRAISED FOR THEIR POSITIVE CONTRIBUTION TO A CLASS. This can occur when a unique word is spelled correctly, a passage is read well, a sentence is correctly analyzed, a paragraph is well-written, or a theme is interpreted logically, for example. This improves both the morale of students individually and the social climate of a classroom in general.

RANDOM GROUPING IS RECOMMENDED TO EXPLORE THEMES IN LITERATURE. Random grouping is preferable because it capitalizes on the strengths of better students, and helps the weaker students at the same time. For example, better readers can orally read themes, while others can listen and follow along in their books; all members of a class can then participate in a discussion. This strategy also promotes group cohesiveness. Ability grouping is recommended to study the composition of language. Since performance of students in language composition will show evidence of a wide range of competence in usage and expression, it would be beneficial for students to work with others near their own demonstrated level. This aspect of language requires students to compose and break down paragraphs and sentences in order to understand the relationship of each constituent to the other. Learning has occurred when a student can orally, and in writing, create a sentence with the correct usage, identify a sentence with the correct usage, and identify a sentence with correct usage from one with incorrect usage.

THE NATURE OF A MAINSTREAMED CLASSROOM NECESSITATES THE STRUCTURING OF COMPOSITION INSTRUCTION IN A DEVELOPMENTAL SEQUENCE OF LANGUAGE SKILLS. This begins with the kernel sentence and progresses to the level of the paragraph (at least). A sequence such as this is basic to good teaching and necessary for the learning of alternate modes of oral and written

expression. Too often language textbooks present materials in which the progression of exercises is totally random, making it almost impossible for transfer learning to occur from one skill to another. Unless the elementary school and its mainstreamed classrooms succeed in providing alternative modes of language expression to students, it is possible that:

> Unaware of the influence of language and the arbitrary way in which they have learned theirs, mature individuals may carry with them all their lives the patterns established in childhood. (Condon, 1966)

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